

Whale strandings in the Northern Territory I. Great Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus* on Casuarina Beach, Darwin.

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At 0800 hours on 22 January 1993, Parks and Wildlife Commission staff were alerted that a Great Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) had stranded on Casuarina Beach, Darwin (12° 21'S 130° 52'E). It was presumed the whale had stranded at some stage during the night or early morning. High tide was at c. 0700 hours and the tide was going out when staff arrived at the scene. At 0930 the whale was still alive and lying on its side but was now mostly exposed to the hot sunny conditions. Attempts were made to keep the whale cool by covering it with hessian and splashing water over it. The whale was an adult male, approximately 15 metres in length, and too heavy for even the large number of people present to move. The whale died before machinery arrived that may have been able to move it to deeper water. The cause of death may have been drowning, as we were not able to get the whale's blowhole above the water.

The whale stranded on a straight section of beach where offshore waters are fairly shallow, so that there is a large area of exposed mudflat at low tide. It was reported that the whale was able to free itself at least once and swim a short distance before becoming stranded in its final resting place. There is no obvious reason why the whale was in this area of shallow water close to the beach. Except for an old injury, a semi-circle of flesh missing from a tail fluke and some squid scars on its head, the animal did not have any sign of serious external injury. A post-mortem revealed no obvious internal injuries or parasites and the liver and heart appeared normal. The gut and large intestine were empty except for a few squid beaks and it was estimated that the whale had not eaten for at least 2-3 days. The skeleton was retained for a future display in the Northern Territory Museum.

This is the first recorded stranding of a Great Sperm Whale in northern Australia. The National Cetacean Strandings Database (Environment Australia) contains reports of 13 strandings of this species. None of these were in the Northern Territory, Queensland or New South Wales and the most northerly stranding on the western Australian coast was south of Perth. Baker (1983) reported that few Sperm Whales strand in Australia but records a mass stranding of 26 animals at Macquarie Harbour in Tasmania in January 1981.

Acknowledgements

Many local people and businesses helped with labour and equipment. The Army provided a barge to tow the whale to the Navy base where a shiplift was used to lift the whale out of the water for initial preparation for the museum display.

References

Baker A.N. (1983) *Whales and dolphins of New Zealand and Australia: an identification guide*. Melbourne University Press.

Northern Territory Naturalist (2000) 16: 15-16

Whale strandings in the Northern Territory II. Dwarf Sperm Whale *Kogia simus*

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In the late afternoon of 20 August 1995, a Dwarf Sperm Whale *Kogia simus* stranded on a Darwin beach. Several attempts were made to encourage the animal to swim out to sea but it kept returning to shore. The whale was then loaded into a hoat and taken out to sea. When the animal was released it swam off strongly, away from the coast. The following day, what appeared to be the same whale again stranded at a beach a few kilometres from the first. The whale died during further attempts to transport it by boat out to sea.

The whale was an adult male, with a total length of 2.1 m. The animal had numerous shallow and some deeper cuts on its body. These cuts may have been caused by sharks or crocodiles biting at the weakened whale, or occurred as the whale washed over rocks prior to beaching. A post-mortem performed showed no obvious signs of chronic illness. The cause of death was probably related to a small perforation of the muscle wall of the right ventricle of the heart, which could have resulted in leakage of blood into the pericardial sac and subsequent heart failure. The cause of the perforation could not be determined but it was likely to have been present prior to the rescue efforts. The stomach and intestines were empty of food.

The Dwarf Sperm Whale is an oceanic species with a cosmopolitan distribution, ex-
